

# MORTUARY CUSTOMS OF NORTHEAST ARNHEM LAND: AN ACCOUNT COMPILED FROM DONALD THOMSON'S FIELDNOTES

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'If a man could but follow all that takes place when a *yarkomrri* [important] man dies he would understand almost all of the culture of these people.'—Fieldnotes, July 29, 1937.

On learning of a man's death close female relatives throw themselves on the ground and hit their heads with knives, bone points or sticks, until blood flows. Some close male relatives may weep and the son of the dead man is likely to become angry and aggressive towards his father's enemies. Like the son, the actual sister's son may also become angry, recalling past quarrels in which his mother's brother had figured, regardless of whether he had been in the right or wrong. Distant male relatives in the camp at the time of death sit quietly with bowed heads.

The wife of a deceased man usually sits down beside him, places the head in her lap and with her left arm around the body cries all day. At night she may lie beside him surrounded by other camp members who weep and sing through the night. The songs indicate the path the deceased's spirit, *birrimbir*, should take.

If people bring news of a death to a camp they do not announce the name of the person but only mention that somebody has died. A senior man in the group then sings a song formally announcing the death and at the end of the song identifies the person and indicates the cause of death without using their name.

## BODY PAINTING

Most deceased people are painted with a clan design, *mintji*. The design painted on the body should be and usually is that belonging to the person's own clan. However, absence of the right people may mean that the clan design of the actual MM clan is used. Once painted the design must not be seen by women or children so the painting is often carried out at the edge of the camp and when the painting is completed the corpse is covered with paperbark, only the face being left bare. Young men who see a clan

design for the first time have underarm sweat, *bunggan wurdoi*, of an older man, rubbed over their eyes.

The body is first rubbed with red ochre and then painted by one or two men, preferably of the opposite moiety to the deceased, who are good hands at painting, *kong mintjimirri*. The most frequently chosen relatives are from the categories FZS, MBS, ZS, MB and MF/FMB. If the painters are of the same moiety they are likely to be close WMB, ZDS, or FZDS but never actual F, B or S. Whoever they are, they are referred to as the *kong wukundi*,<sup>2</sup> hands tabu from death, and after they have completed the painting coat their arms and hands with red ochre, eat apart for about a week, refrain from sexual intercourse and do not go near water. They lived with their wives some distance from others in the camp. The *kong wukundi* and their wives cook all their food in a sand sculpture (*wandjur*—discussed below) and put all their food scraps into another.

*Case 1. Body painting* (see Plate 4). An old Obulkarra [Wulkara of Warner, see 1958: 46] woman died at Milingimbi on Sept. 19, 1935. She had been declining for some months and was very thin from the effects of leprosy. As she was old there was very little crying, but Thomson was surprised at the apparent indifference of all the immediate relatives. The day following the death a Wunguri clansman who called the deceased *muk-kulmal* (FZ) and a Tjambarapoingo man who called her *momalkor* (WMM) painted the body.

The painting was carried out under the shade of a big tree about fifty yards from the camp. The husband and a few other men came to and from the place at which the body was painted from time to time. Ordinarily her husband would have assisted in the painting but he was too old and could not see properly. The brothers of the deceased, as is always the case, could not touch the body. At the conclusion of the painting the *kong wukundi* painted their hands and arms below the elbow with red ochre and that night held a *mant-jarr* ceremony. This took place on the fringe of

the camp. A sand sculpture, *wandjur* (see below) representing the clan well of the deceased was moulded on the ground. The sculpture was associated with the edible corm of *Eleocharis dulcis*, called *rakai*, but the significance of this was hard for Thomson to follow at the time [as he had only just arrived in Arnhem Land]. The men sat around the sculpture singing for an hour or two, and then the women danced behind them. A fire was lit in the centre (*manotji* [literally eye but also used of a certain kind of well]) of the sand sculpture. Leaves were then heated in the fire by a man whose mother came from the 'Wulkarra [that is Obulkarra] side'. All the immediate relatives gathered inside the sculpture about the *manotji*, and a 'big' man *dalkarranirri*, called out in loud voice: '*Kurita*' (fire).

'Ye'h-' replied the participants, with a long hissing shout.

Fire was called because the ancestral woman, *mialk kortjurino*, burned the grass to clear the ground while looking for *rakai*.

The participants then shouted 'Wap wap! wap!', the sound of the fire burning.

The *dalkarranirri* then called out a series of big names with the participants answering 'Ye'h!' to each.

'*Nunimarra*' (big name [of fire?]).

'*Baltjau'wuma*' (a big light made by fire flaring up in thick grass).

'*Matauwuputum*' (leaping tongues of fire).

'*Birraudun*' (cleansed by burning).

Throughout the calling leaves were being heated in the fire and used to strike the bodies of the people standing in the sculpture. After use they were burnt in the fire and to the accompaniment of singing, smothered with earth, 'that *mialk* [woman] walk about now—come along clean place'.

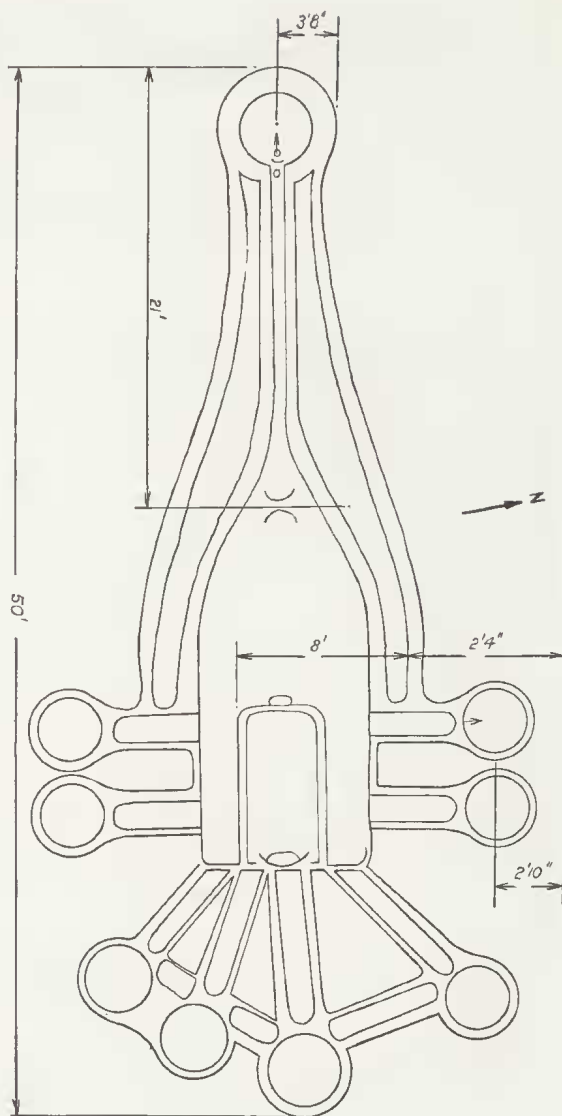
Then the men sang of *marramatta*, a rodent that followed the fire and established itself in the plains after the burning; and then of dog (*workan*) who smelt the rats; and after that of plain cockatoo (*Corella* sp.) *kai karra*.

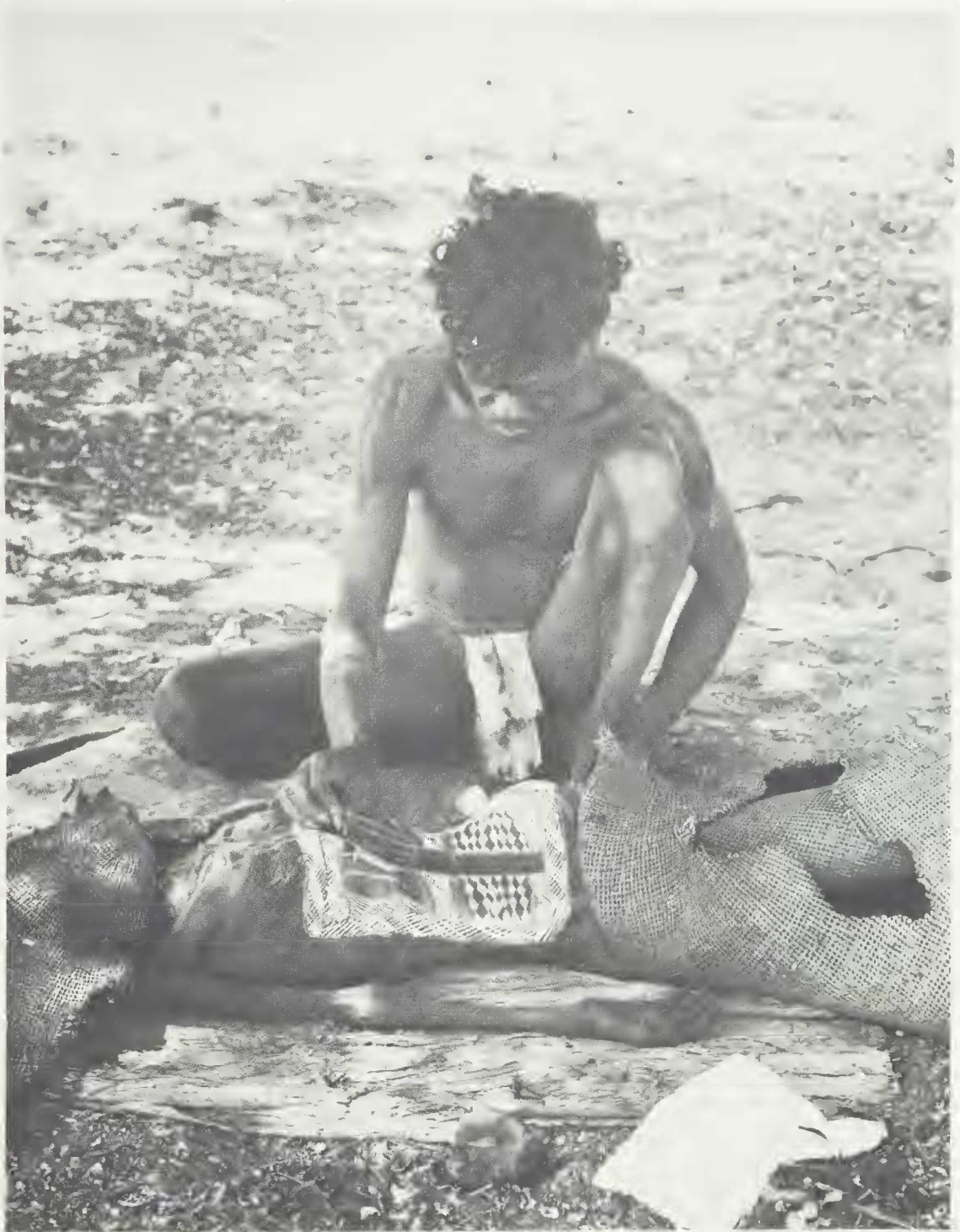
The ancestral woman now looked about for the *rakai*. Next the men sang of mist (*kardany*) which is like fine smoke; then of a spider making its [nest/webb?] in the damp grass. The last song was about the wind that follows the time of burning the countryside.

Close relatives are not free from all tabu until after a second cleansing ceremony.

#### HAIR

Before burial of the body all the head hair is pulled out by the *kong wukundi*. The beard is also pulled out with the aid of hot bees wax. The hair is kept in a basket and sometime during the following weeks is sent by the *kong wukundi* to a fairly distant relative of either moiety to turn into a string decorated with feathers, *marngarai* (Kopapoingo, Tjambara-poingo and Koiyamillilli) or *yiritpal* (Wunguri). The maker of the *yiritpal* or *marngarai* rubs red ochre on the hair as soon as he receives it





An Obulkarra woman being painted with a clan design after death (Case 1).



and is given a present of vegetable food from the *marramorkoimirri* (the deceased's patri-clansmen). Usually the maker is of the opposite moiety to the deceased but he does not have to be; common choices are people in the category of MF/FMB, MB, MBS, WMMB. One to two years later it will be completed and returned to the close kinsmen of the deceased eventually being given to his son, if adult. A large presentation is made to the maker; this formerly included vegetable food, cycad bread and hooked and short spears. The string is then used as a belt to be worn in *ngarra* ceremonies and during fights and *makaratta* peace-making settlements. Eventually the string is cut up to form the 'arms' of men's sacred baskets.

#### BURIAL

Either the same day as the painting or the day afterwards the body is buried. There are two types of burials: either in the ground or in a tree.

A grave, *molo* (referring specifically to the heap of earth covering the grave) is usually 1 m deep and long enough for the corpse to lie extended, on its front. There seems to be some variation of opinion as to which way a deceased man's head should point. In a discussion on the matter a Djinang and a Liagallauwumirri man maintained it should be towards the clan well while a Kopapoingo and Tjambarapoingo man maintained it should be eastwards.

If a body in a grave is covered with heavy logs and stones it usually signifies that it is to be left for good and there is no one to carry the bones about so that the bones will not be removed. There is no belief as to any ill result to the spirit from this practice. Usually, however, the bones are expected to be dug up. In this case the body is covered by a sheet of paperbark, the earth replaced and poles and stones placed on top to stop dingoes, lizards or dogs eating the flesh. If a camp dog does eat the flesh it becomes *wukundi*, and may be killed. If it is not killed it will be put through a cleansing ceremony and any food that the dog catches before the cleansing can only be eaten by a male owner of the dog. Even after

the restriction has been removed the wife of the owner or other women will have to make a ceremonial presentation of food to the *marramorkoimirri* as soon as she eats food the dog has killed.

A grave may be located in one of three places. Where the deceased is a child, it is often buried in the camp of the parents who sleep beside the grave until exhumation. If it is an adult the body is usually buried outside the camp, but it may be in it if the people plan to abandon camp immediately.

In the southeastern part of the Murngin area around Blue Mud Bay there is the third kind of location: the collective burial ground.

*Case 2. Visit to communal burial ground.* On October 18, 1935, Thomson visited a communal burial ground or *wukundi* place at Blue Mud Bay. It was situated on the edge of Marrakulo territory at a place called Mange'yall, 5 km from the Aborigines' camp. [Warner (1958: 49) refers to the people of this area as Marungun and notes that their 'waterhole' and 'country' are called Mangaia which he glosses as 'stench of a dead man'.]

A Marmariny man had died some 2-3 weeks earlier. His body had been taken to this place and put on a platform. The platform stood about 1.50 m high with the body upwards and roughly covered in paperbark. The ground around the platform was sculpted into a *wandjur* pattern. The body was sharing the platform with a number of other bones from skeletons, most of which were covered with red ochre. In this case the head of the body was placed towards the east so that the *malli* [shade or shadow] could go to Buralko [the land of the dead].

On this day Thomson visited the burial ground in the company of five men: Raiwalla, his Mildjingi companion; Taudauongo, the actual elder brother of the deceased; an old Ritarango man; Djimbaron, a Dai'i man; and Marrilyanwi, a Marmariny clansman who called the deceased son and had been one of the *kong wukundi*. The other *kong wukundi* were Liawulpul a Bidingal man who called the deceased *du'wai* (FZS) and Marakuri a korrongo of the deceased (FZDS).

The party set out from the camp travelling across salt pans. A line of fires was burning in the short grass between the camp and the burial ground. As the grass was sparse and short and provided neither food nor cover for the animals this was surprising. On enquiry it was found that the fires had been lit to 'block in *wukundi*—might be smell go all round', i.e. to cut it off from the camp to which it is believed to be more or less connected by smell. When the party was within 0.50 km of the place the Aborigines requested Thomson to leave the water he was carrying lest the *malli* [shade] of the *wurkaidi* (larvae ancestor) might 'go into it and make

(him) sick (*rerri*) . . .'. They translated the term *rerri*, generally used for sickness of any kind, as leprosy.

None of the Aborigines carried spears or spear-throwers which was most unusual; this was said to be one way of helping to avoid sickness. As they neared the spot, Marrilyanwi took charge. Thomson was told not to stay too long or go too close lest he should fall sick. They all approached the platform by a roundabout path to take them upwind. They conversed in whispers and walked slowly with the arms folded to avoid being 'flash'. The little outcrops of stone that appeared on the flat salt pans were carefully avoided. A couple of hundred yards off they halted and Marrilyanwi rubbed his hands under his armpits and then over Raiwalla's arms and legs before kneeling down and biting his knees and shins all the way down. Marrilyanwi then spat or hissed in the direction of the *wukundi* place. He did the same to Thomson. When they moved off Raiwalla was told to walk behind Marrilyanwi in his footsteps. When they reached the platform they looked briefly and then moved away and turned their backs while Marrilyanwi approached the platform and smashed a pipe close to it in order to pacify the *malli* so that it would not follow them. 'Chuckit smoke along him, that's all', explained Marrilyanwi. They left and the Aborigines washed in a salt pan a few hundred yards off. 'Wash'em sweat, ground, that maggot him bite you and me—*malli*—you and me no been see that *malli*', one of them commented.

On October 24, Thomson visited the burial ground again with a Ritarango man, Wuruwul, who had not been there before. Raiwalla and Thomson did not have to go through any of the procedures of the previous visit, although they did approach upwind again. Wuruwul, a stranger to the place, was very fearful of sickness, particularly because he was somewhat fat. As a precaution against sickness he had his knees and elbows bitten (see Plate 5) and left the area well before the rest of the party.

The alternative to ground burial is exposure on a platform, either built in a tree and called *djamba* or free standing like the kind used in house building and called *katauwurro*. [Warner states (1958: 433) that the body on a platform is placed face up so that when the adominal wall breaks the intestines will not fall.] Thomson found that although this was true for the eastern half of the area the people to the west of the Ritarango place the body on its front.

The choice of burial mode depended on several factors. Small children and old people were usually put in the ground and active people in their prime, male or female, were placed on platforms where the flesh dries more quickly and the bones become cleaner. If a person were killed in a *mingo* raid they were usually put

in a tree by their relatives so that the people could leave the area immediately.

There is a third mode of disposal found among the Burara who Thomson reports as eating young men, women and children, after roasting in ashes [although Thomson did visit the Burara it is not clear how much of the following information was obtained by talking with and observing Burara people and how much was supplied by their Glyde River neighbours who hold the Burara in low esteem].

The dead are eaten by all relatives with the exception of M and MB because the 'two fella been carrim along *bindji* [belly]'. Bodies to be eaten have an incision made in their left side through which the viscera are removed. The liver is eaten but the heart, penis and vulva are dried and carried in a special small basket (*pulupur* in Burara) or in a *matjitji* to increase hunting effectiveness. The lungs and stomach are buried.

Because the body is eaten the western Burara do not paint it, although the eastern Burara, under the influence of their western neighbours, the Wallamango and Yarnango, do. These latter groups rarely eat their dead but do inspect the internal organs, for signs of sorcery such as sores (*tjitji*) on the kidney, heart or liver, by making an incision between the crest of the ilium and the last rib on the left side. Now that there are *marngit* medicine men in the area—a new tradition from the south [see Thomson 1961]—the people no longer perform this kind of investigation.

#### POSSESSIONS

The Djinang speaking peoples pull down the deceased's hut and eventually set fire to it when the bones have been exhumed. The main possessions of a person, such as his spears or a canoe he has made, are treated throughout the area in the same way as people. They are symbolically cleansed at a *mantjarr* ceremony and in the case of canoes rubbed with red ochre often on two separate occasions. If a man has been speared, his possessions are broken and pieces given to his relatives in camp which an informant interpreted as 'that mean I push all these people go for fight'. Each piece of broken possession used in this way is called *maidjaballa*.



Wuruwul having his elbow bitten as a precaution against sickness prior to visiting the communal burial ground in Blue Mud Bay (Case 2).



If a person does not want to fight he makes a new dilly bag and gives it back to the man (usually the elder brother of the deceased), who distributed the *maidjaballa*. The broken pieces are given most frequently to relations in the categories MF/FMB, MMB, FZS, MBS, ZS.

If a person dies from a cause other than spearing his possessions are also broken up and distributed to various other residential groups where there are close relations of the deceased. These possessions are then used in the cleansing ceremonies.

Thomson reports a case where following the death of an important man a restriction was placed over a large area of land.

*Case 3. An area of land placed under restriction.* While at Katji [on the mainland south of Milingimbi] camp in January 1937 Thomson noticed red blazes on the trees along the path to Derby Creek. These were to free the area about the Katji River from a restriction that had been imposed at the death of an important man.

The restriction had been imposed at the death of Raiwalla's father-in-law [Raiwalla, a Mildjingi clansman, was Thomson's guide and friend] because of his influence when alive and because he had spent much of his life in that area. The restriction was not removed until after the *bukubut* [exhumation ceremony], when the trees were painted and a fire lit to burn off the grass and cleanse the area—both literally and figuratively. The fire was started by burning his old camp with a fire of ironwood. After the burning off the women went out and collected root foods in the area and brought them back to the son and brothers of the deceased. If any outsider eats food from the area while the country is under the restriction the close relatives resent this and try to kill the offender by sorcery or with an actual war party (*miringo*). Such restrictions do not apply in remote areas but only when important people (*yarkomirri*) die in the vicinity of an important camping place. The death of the wife or daughter of an influential man can also lead to the same restriction. Tjambarapoingo, Kopapoingo and Ritarango peoples have the same custom.

#### CLEANSING CEREMONIES AND GROUNDS

Cleansing ceremonies of the kind described in Case 1 are held at several stages following death. After burial the clan song cycle of the deceased is sung about a circular sand sculpture and all men, women and children present, together with the larger possessions are dusted with heated leaves (*mantjarr*) to drive the *malli* (shade) of the deceased away, to render the hunting weapons effective and the other pos-

sessions safe to handle.

At a second ceremony of similar form the participants throw pieces of the deceased's possessions into the fire burning in the small depression which forms the focus of all the cleansing ceremonies at this stage. At this second stage the women usually dance while the men are singing the clan cycle.

A week or two later the third cleansing ceremony, called *bukulup* (forehead-washing), is held. The small circular sand sculpture used in the previous ceremonies now gives way to a much larger and more elaborate representation of the clan well. Starting in the early hours of the morning the men sing the clan songs and then once the sun is up the close relatives, male and female and the *kong wukundi*, wash standing in the well and rub red ochre over themselves. This ritual frees the *kong wukundi* from all tabus. The patrilineal men make a presentation of food to members of the opposite moiety.

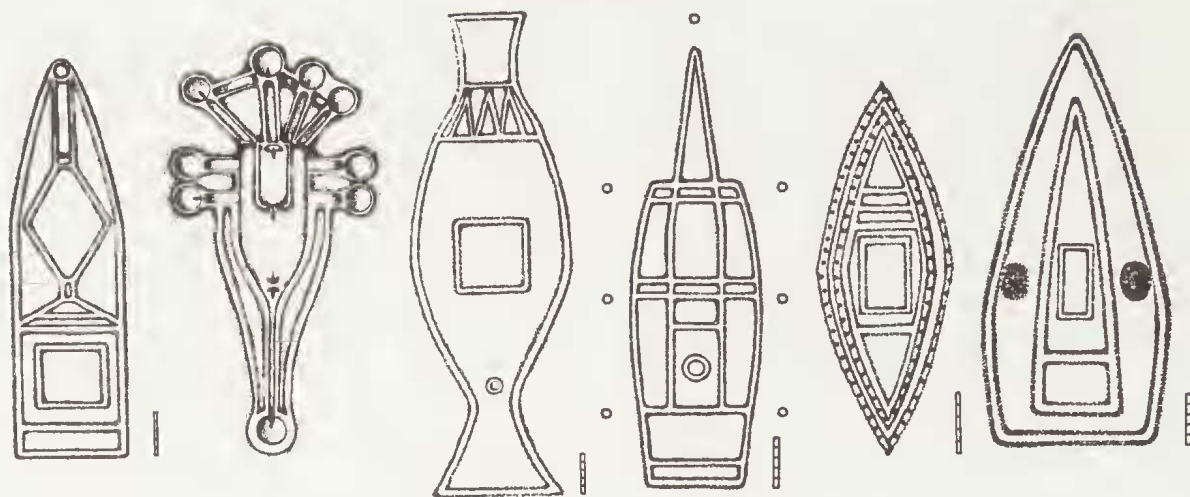
The sand sculptures are also used in two other contexts. Most frequently in the curing of sores or wounds but also around graves and burial platforms (see Case 2). Several clans may share the use of a particular design and a single clan may have several designs relating to different places with differing degrees of importance. Figure 1 shows sketches of six grounds seen in use by Thomson.

#### EXHUMATION AND FLESH DISPOSAL

After a month or two the bones are exhumed. The men who perform this task are also known as *kong wukundi* [possibly also as *kong djok*] but are not necessarily the same people who buried the body. They may be of either moiety, with the reservation that a man may not assist in the exhumation of his siblings.

The grave is usually dug out either with bare hands or with a sharpened stick. Among the Djinang speaking groups only males are present at the grave. One will sing and another play the digeridoo. Among the people to the east, women are present at the exhumation and dance while the men sing.

The treatment of the flesh varies with the kind of burial and the area. Among the peoples



## SOME WANDJUR SAND SCULPTURE DESIGNS

(Running from left to right and top to bottom)

1. Marango clan (*dua moiety*) *wandjur* representing the bee hive *yarrpain* [referred to as 'long-nose sugar bag' in Aboriginal English on account of the relatively long entrance tunnel]. The central circle represents the eye of the clan well; the rectangle surrounding the well and the area immediately above it is referred to by the sacred name *bambula*. The small rectangle had a pole 483 mm tall erected in it, called *warrinman*, representing an ancestral hero. The ground was used on July 24, 1937, at Milingimbi for the cleansing of two small girls. The same design may also be used by Tjambarapoingo speaking clans.
2. Birkilla clan (*yiritja moiety*) *wandjur* representing the bee hive *birkurda* at a place called Yarrakka in Arnhem Bay. The small circle at the end represents the entrance (*ngorro*—nose) of the hive. [This *wandjur* should be compared with the illustration published by Thomson in the 'Illustrated London News' for February 25, 1939, page 294.] This ground is the most elaborate form of the *wandjur* and only used for important men; others have a simplified, but recognizably similar, version. The ground was used on August 7, 1937, to cure a Birkilla/Kopapoingo man with a sore.
3. Birkilli clan (*yiritja moiety*) *wandjur* representing *waitjura* [? a fish]. The piles of white sand are sores (*tjitji* or *mapan*) made by a crab (*mirriya* or *katjirri*). The location referred to is Karraparra in Blue Mud Bay and the design is also used by Yituwa clansmen of that area. The ground was used on August 7, 1937.
4. A *dua moiety wandjur* used by Liagauwumirri. Maiyarmaiyarr and other Tjambarapoingo speaking groups united by the track of the Djanggauwo sisters. The ground represents springs left by the sisters whether they thrust the 'yam' sticks into the ground. The springs are called *milmindjarrk* [and are marked by being freshwater sources in areas of salt surface water. The arrows appear to indicate the direction of flow of the waters beneath the wells]. The ground was used on July 30-31, 1937, at Milingimbi for a Maiyarmaiyarr man who was drowned when a canoe turned over during a storm in the Cadell Straits. There were six people in the canoe: two men escaped but a blind man and a second man [it is not clear which was the Maiyarmaiyarr man] with his son and daughter were drowned because they were encumbered with turtle hunting gear. The ground measured 15 m overall.
5. Kolumalla clan (*dua moiety*) *wandjur* representing *mar'ndi* [?] The ground was outlined in white sand and used on August 14th, 1937.
6. Warramirri clan (*yiritja moiety*) *wandjur* representing a whale, *woimirri*. The small circle is the rectum above the tail. The central rectangle is both the whale's stomach and the *manotji* or eye of of the clan well. The soil forming the outline was raised up 100-125 mm and whitened with sand. This ground was used on August 14 and 15, 1937, to cure a child of the Wunguri clan who had sores. The child's full MMB came from the Warramirri clan.



east of the Glyde River, including the Kanal-pingo and Djinba, flesh from a grave burial is put back into the ground. Flesh from a platform burial is placed in paperbark and left in a forked tree nearby to be destroyed naturally. The platform itself is pulled down and buried in the sand sculpture in which it was standing.

Among the Djinang, Mildjingi, Balambi, Wullaki, Burara and all groups westward of the Glyde, the flesh is kept and at the *bukubut* ceremony placed in a special hollow log called *larkan djamurmur*.

*Case 4. Larkan djamurmur form of flesh disposal.* Early in the morning of November 11, 1936, the Wullaki group at Katji started to sing in preparation for a *bukubut*. The Wullaki people were joined by some Milliereng clansmen because the dead woman's mother was of this clan.

The body had been buried in the ground. A few days earlier it had been exhumed and the flesh roughly stripped from the body and wrapped in a paperbark bundle. The bones were in a second bundle. The men had then cut a tree for the *larkan* [coffin] and the women collected cycad nuts for a food presentation. While the cycad nuts were being leached the *larkan* was fashioned and a *marraidjirri meri* (an effigy of an ancestral spirit) made. The preparation of the *larkan* included singeing it, cutting the spikes on one end, and painting it. On the morning of November 11, 1936, the men were seated in the shade of a clump of trees some distance from the camp with the *larkan*. The bundle of flesh was apparently [this not unequivocally clear in the notes] already inside the coffin. The wrapped bones and a *marraidjirri meri* called Kanangalkngalk were also nearby. This ancestral spirit was responsible for the people using a log coffin.

An informant explained that in the distant past (*millegidji*) there were spirits (*meri* or *morkoi*) that were neither animals nor men and who still live in the bush today. These spirits were never men but a race of their own. One of these spirits, Kanangalkngalk, is still alive today and some Wullaki people even claim to have seen him in the monsoon forest. Kanangalkngalk has two wives and some children, none of whom is a threat to the people like the spirits of deceased human beings. The *marraidjirri meri* represent Kanangalkngalk.

They say that in the distant past Kanangalkngalk cut down a hollow tree. The tree fell and as it fell water started to pour out of it. He tried to hold onto the log as the water flowed out but his fingers slipped and the log moved off like a fish. The log cut the ground as it went allowing the water to flow. Along the way the log heard a *buralla* [publicly used bull-roarer] sing out. Then, perhaps because the water told it to, the log went underground at Katji carrying earth and water with it as it went. The log wanted to go down towards the sea but found the ground too hard so it came back and let the water go. From the end of the Katji lagoons, where

he turned back, there is no deep water but only transient flood waters at the end of the wet season. The log came back to Katji and decided to stay where the deep pool is beside the camp. At that place he gave himself a name: the log said, 'I am *djamurmur larkan*.' The people today reflect on the fact that they take fish, water snakes (*Hypsirhina*) and wild taro from Katji where the *larkan* walked around. That is why they paint them on the log coffin and cut the long 'fingers' into the mouth of the log, representing the jagged end which resulted from it breaking the ground and making Katji River.

The men around the *larkan* began to sing a song about the *wullawarri* fish drawn on the log. Then they picked up the log and danced with it, making short lunges and rushes, replacing it on the ground at the end of each movement. (See Plate 6.) The log was then erected on the open ground near the camp and the *marraidjirri* and bones were carried toward the camp by two old men. The dance that followed was called after the spirit, Kanangalkngalk *meri*. The main body of men danced forwards looking for the *meri* carried by an old man, who represented the male spirit. The one who carried the bones represented a female *morkoi* [spirit] [Kanangalkngalk's wife?]. The first old man kept dancing forward with the *meri* to reassure himself that the other man had the bones.

The women danced their slight shuffling dance from one foot to another on the fringe of the dance area. The dance concluded with an old man, *dalkargrining* [*dalkarramirri*] calling the big names of the *marain* of the deceased and of her country. Then the bones were handed over to the actual younger sister of the woman's mother, the real mother having died. As she received the bones in their bundle the *marraidjirri meri* was placed on top and she walked off with the whole lot.

At a later date the string on the *marraidjirri meri* is removed and made into *ngaimbak* [arm bands] and used in decorating a *bati giwillir* [a kind of men's basket]. This basket is then presented to the man who made the string. The conclusion to the *bukubut* comes sometime later. A presentation of food is made to the *kong wukundi* by the close relatives of the deceased, usually the *F. duwe* (either FZS or D), MB and EB if it is a man that has died but not in the case of a woman.

This food is not eaten by the full F or MB but FEB and FYB, *duwe* and *kalli* (MBS/D) do share in it.

In the past the Djinang people removed the flesh from the buttocks, washing it free of the soft and more putrid surrounding flesh and tied it up in paperbark. Later these parcels of flesh were cooked outside the camp, wrapped in grass and paperbark and hung around the neck to increase hunting effectiveness. Some people would go a step further and soak the flesh in a mixture of honey and water and then nibble a fraction with their eyes closed.

The bones are washed and wrapped in paperbark, or if the flesh is not entirely removed, left exposed in a forked tree. During the 1-2 weeks before the *bukabut* ceremony the bones remain outside the camp and may not be seen by the women.

The *kong wukundi* camp apart for several days. The wetter the body the longer the period of restriction. If it is particularly sloppy the men eat with a bone point (*pringal*) or any sharpened stick because the fluids will have penetrated their finger nails making them smell for some time.

A day or two after the exhumation the *kong wukundi* participate in a cleansing ceremony singing all night and washing in the morning in a sand sculpture. After washing they cover themselves in red ochre. Several days later they have a clan design painted on them which releases them from all restrictions.

*Case 5. Exhumation.* On January 13, 1937, the bones of a Djinang man named Lamieri, *dua* moiety, buried at Gillere in Millierieng territory were exhumed (see Plate 7).

Only a few people went to the area of the grave where the man had been buried 6-7 weeks before. Those not directly involved in exhumation stood upwind of the grave.

Two men were involved in handling the bones. The man who removed the bones was the adopted father of the deceased from the same country [i.e. clan] named Balambarri. He was assisted by Makani a Mildjingi man a 'ZS' of the deceased, who was married to two of his daughters.

On the way to the grave there was some discussion as to whether the body was soft enough yet to make the removal of the bones easy. The grave itself was unmarked except for a plain circular sand sculpture near the head of the grave and a heap of wood lying on top to keep the dogs off. The body was about 1 m below the surface, lying face down on a layer of grass and completely extended. The grave itself was in loose, well-drained sandy soil about 90 m from a creek. The soil was removed largely with bare hands but use was made of a canoe paddle that happened to have been in the camp and brought along.

An old clansman of the deceased, a classificatory F, sang to the accompaniment of clapsticks. In Kopapoingo and Tjambarapoingo ceremonies women are present and dance during the exhumation but not among the Djinang. The *kong wukundi* examined the body to see that the flesh was sufficiently decomposed and finding it was, the assistant, Makani, went off to get some water in a paperbark trough.

The deceased had been an old man of not much standing so he had not had a clan design painted on his chest.

The adopted father removed the bones, starting

from the feet and working upwards. Makani poured water over the bones as the first man washed them thus reducing the period he would be wukundi [tabu]. The head was picked up last and washed by pouring water in through the *foramen magnum*. Each bone as it was picked up was placed on a sheet of bark beside the grave. When they had all been removed the grave was filled in again. The two men washed and smeared themselves with white paint from head to foot: 'everybody no more want to smell'. Red ochre is only used in the final cleansing. During the night a sand sculpture 1.60 m in diameter was made at Makani's camp and a ceremonial washing called *bukulup* carried out on the following morning (see Plate 8). About sunrise the two *kong wukundi* washed by pouring water over one another's bodies and then smearing red ochre all over themselves, their spears and spear-throwers and immediate possessions. This freed the men and their weapons from tabu.

It is usual to wait two or three days before holding this ceremony, but as the camp was breaking up on the following day it was completed straight away.

#### MARRAJDIRRI MESSAGE STRINGS

*Marraidjirri* is the general term for a class of decorated strings whose most common use is in the mustering of people for exhumation and final disposal ceremonies (see Plate 9). *Marraidjirri* strings differ from *marngarai* strings in that although many of them incorporate hair of a dead person they are largely made of fibre string and are used in a different way, (for *marngarai* strings see under 'Hair' above).

Each clan has its own *marraidjirri* forms representing totems associated with the clan (see Table 1). Generally there are several forms of the string-like *marraidjirri* which are classed together as *bogongo* and spoken of as 'small' in contrast to the elaborate figure emblems such as that mentioned in Case 4 which are referred to as big (*yindi*).

Besides being used to gather people for mortuary ceremonies they are also associated with circumcision ceremonies, the social development of children and love magic. In circumcision ceremonies they are used to gather people. The second usage results from the first occasion on which a small child picks up any natural object such as grass, a shell, fruit or small lizard and gives it to its parents. This object is then tied into a small bundle and sent off to an acquaintance both geographically and socially distant. This





Wullaki men taking the *larkan* coffin to the camp for erection (Case 4).





The exhumation of a Djinang man (Case 5).



Ritual washing in a *wandjur* sand sculpture of two of the men who participated in the exhumation shown in plate 4 (Case 5).





On August 20, 1935, this messenger, a man of the *yiritja* moiety arrived at Milingimbi wearing a *dua* moiety *marraidjirri* message string. He had

come to call the people to Elcho Island for the final disposal of the bones of a Tjamborapoingo man.



person fashions the object into his own clan's large *marraidjirri* and presents it to the child's parents in a large public ceremony. The parents then make a payment of traditional wealth of considerable proportions to the maker of the *marraidjirri*. On completion of the ceremony the string is removed from the core about which it is bound and made into arm bands or used for adorning certain kinds of men's baskets (*bati mindjalpoi*). Some *marraidjirri* strings may be used in love magic after they have been used in one of the foregoing ceremonies. A sweetheart or errant wife is believed to be impelled to follow the man involved when the *marraidjirri* string is looped over her hands.

The strings sent out to muster people for ceremonies are really representations of big (or proper) *marraidjirri* constructed around wooden or sometimes paperbark centres and used at the *bukubut* (see Case 4). These solid emblems look like *rangga* (the secret totemic emblems) as an informant observed to Thomson, but may be seen by women and children and are said to represent the clan's ancestral *morkoi* or spirit being. This *morkoi* is different from the clan's ancestral hero, *wangar*. However, as with the clan totem, the string covering is called *buyu* and is equated with flesh; in its broadest sense it just means covering. The core is regarded as *maraiin* (sacred) and identified with the bones of the skeleton.

TABLE 1

Some of the small *marraidjirri* strings  
(*bogongo*) used by various groups

CLAN/GROUP	NAME and DESCRIPTION
Wanguri	Yoko—a round root called <i>Kalun</i> in Kopapoingo ( <i>Cissus carnosa</i> ) Komulo—the great billed heron
Birkilli	Ku'ak—a small bird Yukuwa—the root food <i>Vigna vexillata</i>
Tjambarapoingo	Tjarrak—a tern ( <i>sterna</i> sp.)
Kanalpingo	Kalliwur—a large white lily
Liagallauwumirri	Wititj—Snake
Mandalpoi	
Ritarango	Ku'ak—a small bird
Durrilli	Malka—bee ( <i>Trigona</i> sp.)
Obulkarra	Yoko—round root ( <i>Cissus carnosa</i> )
Mildjingi	Kurungur—a small cloud and also the wild bean <i>Ipomea pes-caprae</i>

#### BUKUBUT FOLLOWING EXHUMATION OF BONES ONLY

When the food for the *bukubut* ceremony is ready, a week or two after exhumation a classificatory ZS goes into the bush and picks up the bones. Meanwhile the *marramorkoimirri* prepare the ground, known by different names to different clans:

Liagallauwumirri	call it	<i>birlimbil</i>
Djerangoikoi	„ „	<i>djirrkurul</i> (of <i>bulmantji</i> or shark)
Birkilli	„ „	<i>yallandu</i> (from Bukunda, a place)
Mildjingi	„ „	<i>manitji</i>

When the 'ZS' carrying the bones, approaches the ground just outside the camp where the ceremony is to be held, the men begin to sing. The *marramorkoimirri* and a great crowd of more distant kinsmen dance around with spears poised and jab these at the bones in their paperbark wrappings as they lie in the sand sculpture. 'Him want spear that one, open him—*wangar* (totemic ancestor) been do.' Not all clans carry out the ceremony in this way. The western ones, Liagallauwumirri, Mildjingi and Djinang only sing.

The Birkilli, Daigurgur, Ritarango and allied groups customarily spear the parcel, and do the same again when they are holding the final disposal ceremonies. They open the paperbark with the spears and then sit down and wash the bones before placing them in a new wrapping, and hanging them from a forked stick standing in the middle of the sand sculpture. At this stage the women and children may not see the bones although they can later on when they have been red ochred.

From the late afternoon onwards through the whole night the men sing and complete the *bukubut* ground where the bones will be presented to the woman who is to carry them. This is usually the actual FZ, EZ, adult D, or mother if the deceased is a young child. If the bones of an older person are given to a mother it is always to a classificatory mother; they are never in the custody of a sister

although she may handle and carry them. In the morning these relatives and the MM will dance near the song group which is usually composed of EB, YB, F. The bones are then handed to the MF/FMB, ZH or MMB. Most commonly, it is to the ZH who, then hands the bones to the deceased's FZ who will carry them during the following weeks.

Previously the F, S, ZDS and ZS of the deceased will have made a bark container, *tarra*, decorated with the deceased's clan design for the bones to be carried in. The Mildjingi and Liagallauwumirri do [may?] not have this custom. There is then a ceremonial presentation of food by all the helpers in the various stages of the ceremony to the *marramorkoi-mirri*.

Often the skull is not placed in with the other bones but carried separately by WB or another ZH. The bones are carried for 1-5 weeks. At the end of this period they are again hung from a forked stick in camp and only moved on shifting camp, until the final disposal of the bones in a hollow log coffin ceremony.

*Case 6. A Wullaki bukubut ceremony.* A *bukubut* ceremony at which the bones of a dead Wullaki speaking man of *yiritja* moiety were handed over to the deceased's sisters was held at Katji on October 3 and 4, 1936.

When Thomson arrived in camp late in the afternoon the ceremony was about to begin. The bones were hanging in a small shade (*kurngan*) along with the *marraidjirri meri*. The *marraidjirri* represented a wasp's nest called *barral* and was decorated with a picture of the little green pigeon, *work'miringo* (*Chaleophaps chrysochloris*). This bird is associated with the paper wasp in areas of monsoon forest.

Although the deceased man was Wullaki the *bukubut* was carried out with a Mildjingi song sequence because the Wullaki relatives had handed the bones to the Mildjingi [Thomson has Raranggal *malla* at this point in his notes, but on the first page he equates Mildjingi *malla* with Raranggal *malla*] clansmen as a friendly compliment.

The ceremony began with singing to the accompaniment of clapsticks and didgeridoo and continued for some hours into the night until everybody was supposed to be asleep. Each man then seized a torch of lighted paperbark and started to dance, first encircling the shade with the bones and *marraidjirri* in it, and then moving into the camp crying *berk! berk! berkberk ko ye'h ko ye'h*.

They encircled the whole camp where everyone pretended to remain sleeping and then trotted back in single file to the shade. This was the dance of the flying fox. The singing then continued. When they began the song about the jungle fowl (*gulla-*

*uwurr*) the men started to dig a long serpentine path, which eventually measured 42 m, from the shade to the point where the men constructed a representation of the bird's nest. At intervals the men working on the road and the nest cried out *kurrkun kurrkun djue wurak—grr'rr* in imitation of the jungle fowl; these cries were heard intermittently through the night. In making the nest mound the men imitated the movements of the bird by crouching low.

Early in the morning the *marraidjirri* was brought out (see Plate 10). The first dance was the wasp dance. While most of the men danced, two of their number darted out towards a man who held the *marraidjirri* at arm's length on a spear-thrower and pretended that they were being attacked at the wasp's nest. The men were meant to be looking for yams in the monsoon forest and to be driven back by the wasps. The women danced at some distance with the common rhythmic shuffle known as *lukn wankain 'ngorro*. When the dancers reached the jungle fowl nest at the end of the path they called out the big names associated with the deceased. These were both the deceased's *maraiin* (sacred) names and those of the Mildjingi clan. As the calling finished the bones were handed over by the deceased's WB (Bulambirri) to the dead man's full sisters. [They would not be the custodians of the bones].

During the period in which bones are carried they are thought to indicate the approach both of news bearers and of revenge parties. If the bones make a light tap against the bark container this indicates the approach of a person with news of some kind. If the tap is loud it announces the approach of a war party.

Once or twice before burial in the hollow log coffin, the bones are taken out of the *tarra* and red ochre and this may be associated with the change of *tarra* too. After the second red ochring the mother may become custodian of the bones. This painting with red ochre removes *wukundi* from the woman who carried the bones initially.

#### HOLLOW LOG COFFIN

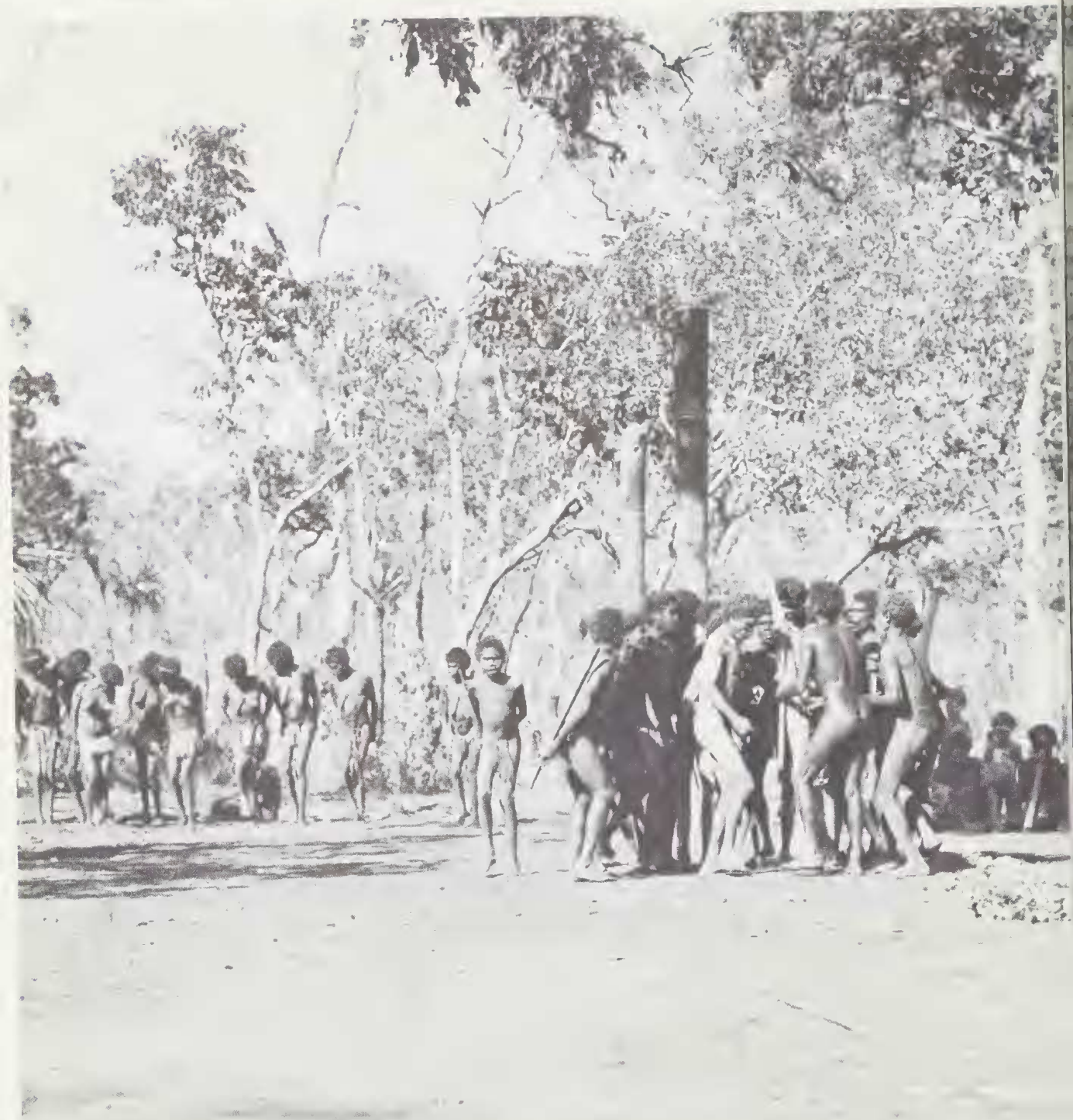
The holding of the final ceremony is decided in this way. The father or his brother, asks the relatives carrying the *tarra* whether they are ready to make the coffin. If they agree preparations are made for the ceremony. Frequently the relatives carrying the *tarra* feel the need to make an excuse to agree and say that they are ready because they have carried the bones for a long time without help from anybody else. The coffin is made by F, EB, YB and





Dancing with a wasp emblem in a Wullaki *buku-but* (Case 6).





A hollow log coffin ceremony in Arnhem Bay,  
1937.

MMB, all members of the deceased's patri-moiety.

Hollow log coffins collectively referred to as *dupan* (hollow) differ in size, ranging from 1.25 to 4.50 m. and different clans call them by different names (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

The names used by different groups for their hollow log coffins

CLAN/GROUP	NAME
Ritarango	
Mandjikai	Wurrwurr
Birkilli	Djallumbo—associated with a wading bird found on the salt pans
Tjambarapoingo	Daimirri—a hollow log thrown by an ancestral hero into the sea and transformed into a hollow stone outside Buckingham Bay
Liagauwumirri	Mululu
Liagallauwumirri	Bardaru—Associated with the crow and the milky way
Marango	Kallangurr
Kanalpingo	Larradjadja
Mildjingi	
Warramirri	Kapalla—associated with the funnel of a steamer and the blow-hole of a whale
Tjapu	Larrakit

However, all are made in the same way. A tree which has been hollowed out by termites, is cut and cleaned by burning. A circle is incised 300-600 mm from the top end and two small holes cut diagonally opposite each other 50-75 mm from the top. The circular incision is called *derong* and always painted yellow on *yiritja* coffins and *red* on *dua* coffins. The two holes are called eyes and serve to commemorate the fact that the coffins were originally made by each clan's spirit ancestors and in some way personify them.

After the coffin has been shaped it is moved into a large shade where the men work on painting it. As the painting nears completion the people gather for the final ceremony. Each evening there is singing and dancing. On the final morning the bones are taken from the *tarra* and covered with red ochre. The skull is then painted with the clan design. The coffin is brought out and placed at an angle with one end supported on a forked stick. Inside a sand sculpture of the clan well a close male relative of the deceased, often a *korrang* (FZDS) or *moralkor* (MMBS) breaks the long bones and

the skull before placing them in the log. Finally the log is erected (see Plate 11).

The bones of several people of both moieties may be placed in the same coffin. The coffins are left standing, eventually decaying and disappearing without trace.

## References

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- WARNER, L., 1958. *A black civilization: a social study of an Australian tribe*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Donald Thomson Ethnographic Collection was donated to the University of Melbourne by Mrs Thomson following the death of her husband in May 1970. By agreement the University has lent the Collection to the National Museum of Victoria where it is now housed.

The principal purpose in preparing this paper for publication is to draw attention to the ethnographic riches of the Collection. No compilation of notes can do justice to the vision that informed the fieldwork nor create the interpretive synthesis that Thomson had in mind. Inevitably the immense ethnographic detail of the fieldnotes can now be appreciated only by a series of scholars who will be able to breathe interpretive life into different aspects of the many but unintegrated details that characterize all fieldnotes.

This introduction to the Arnhem Land section of the Collection has been built on Thomson's notes for a paper on 'Kopapoingo Death and Mourning Rituals'. Within the general framework of the notes I have added descriptions from his fieldnotes as case studies. The presentation of both the text and the cases has been kept as close to Thomson's own wording as possible, but some alteration has been unavoidable in the process of converting fieldnotes to continuous prose. Further the notes cover several years and during that time Thomson's understanding of the language and life underwent substantial changes. In particular, his spelling of words in the local languages altered, so I have standardized on the later forms. A number of details in the cases and in particular those associated with the *wandjur* sand sculptures, have had to be omitted since the meaning was obscure and there was no simple way of setting out the information, some of it possibly deriving significance from its location on the page and its position relative to other notes. Undoubtedly a scholar with particular knowledge of some of the clans' religious life would be able to make sense of some of the notes that have been omitted. For this reason any person working intensively on a particular aspect of the mortuary customs described here or on the details of symbolism in the life of a particular group will have to consult the notes themselves where they will find the odd word or phrase that may be of significance to them. I have enclosed substantive additions to the text by myself in square brackets.

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Gregory Dening, Alan West and Nancy Williams. Special thanks are due to Judith Wiseman for her unflagging assistance in all things connected with the Collection.

<sup>2</sup> It is uncertain whether this usage of *wukundi* is *correct*. The primary reference is to places associated with death that are tabu in some way (see Case 2). Thomson appears to have extended the meaning to cover other tabus associated with death.